



David Adams, 2015

David Adams, 77

The Barefoot Runner

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO RUN BAREFOOT on the roads? Well, it isn't always pleasant, as David reveals to us. While attending a brain research conference in Gagra, Georgia, before the breakup of the Soviet Union, David went out for a run:

And then I hear this noise. The soles of my feet had come off. This whole thing was flapping, and underneath was just very tender because it was under the skin. I had torn the skin off. That wasn't too much fun, actually. It was hurting when it was flapping. When I looked down, I said, "Hey, my feet have come off."

David's thick skin betrayed him because he had laid off running for a few months to recover from tendinitis. The thick skin had thinned and softened. Normally, running barefoot creates a leathery, thickening of the skin. David says, "When you run barefoot you have very, very thick skin. Whenever I meet carpenters, I say, 'Let me see your hand,' because my foot looks like the hand of a carpenter."

David Adams was born on May 13, 1939, in Webster Groves, Mo. He began running on the track team in high school but mentions not being very good, although his brother had been a state champion. For his undergraduate work, David went to Columbia College in New York City and would run around the campus neighborhood. Then David went on to graduate school at Yale University for a dual Ph.D. degree in psychology and physiology, and accepted a position

at Wesleyan University doing research on the brain for the next 25 years while commuting from New Haven, Conn.

While working at Wesleyan, David became more earnest about his running. In his late 30s he tried competing in a couple of races, but found he was having knee problems. After running five to ten miles his knees would cramp up. It was at this time that David met the great barefoot runner, Charlie Robbins, a two-time national marathon champion, and they did some training runs together. To address the difficulty with David's knees, Charlie said, "Well, if you run barefoot you won't have a problem with that because you'll have a more stable foot plant." David took Charlie's advice and has been a barefoot runner now for nearly four decades. But when considering barefoot running, body type must be kept in mind. At 100 pounds and slight of built Charlie ran like a gazelle, while David, at 175 pounds and with a large-boned, muscular build, hit the pavement with greater impact.

Three Barefoot Stories

David illuminates some of the obstacles and pitfalls of a barefoot runner in these vignettes. "I've heard glass crunch under my feet while running," he says. "I get a piece of glass every couple of hundred miles, and I always carry a safety pin to take it out." In this first story, however, the safety pin was not sufficient:

I remember a funny story about this guy named George Brown, who wrote the column on running for the *Hartford Current* over the years, and George was terribly upset that I could beat him. He was a little bit older than me, and he was a pretty good runner, and he and I were pretty much the same speed. So once we ran a 5K race down at Bridgeport on the 4th of July, and it was hotter than hell. We started off warming up in the field, and I got a big piece of glass in my foot. I mean as big as the end of my finger there and I'm bleeding like a stuck pig. And George says, "I'm going to beat you this time." And I said, "No, you're not gonna beat me, I'm gonna to beat you." The problem was I couldn't take the glass out with my finger, but I was doing yoga at the time, and

I bent over and took it out with my teeth. So I left a trail of blood, but I beat him in the race.

"The funniest stories are about getting arrested for indecent exposure," David says. Here is one such story:

I used to work in Moscow those years as a brain researcher. . . . I was determined to run every road in Moscow, and the KGB must have thought I was a spy. I ran out into the countryside about 15 miles, and I was going to go to the end to the subway line and take the subway back. So I get out to the end of the line and I get on the subway, and I hear this voice, "Young man, young man" (in Russian), and it was the woman who was in charge of the subway, and she wouldn't let me on the train. So she called the police because I had no shoes, and the cops came and put me in a taxi, and I get down to the hotel and I say to the driver, "I'll bet you haven't seen this before, someone arrested for being barefoot." And he says, "Oh no, that's nothing. Last week the cops called me to the railroad station and there was a guy totally naked and drunk. Hey, you have clothes on, you know."

This account reflects the times and cultural sensibilities toward a barefoot runner:

Then in Soviet Georgia I used to run the route that Shevardnadze, the President, used to take in his limousine to go to work coming down off the mountain. This is in Tbilisi, Georgia. The guard house is along the route, and I would see the limousine pass. And one day when I'm running that route, the guard in the guard house sees me and he grabs me and he says, "The President can't see a barefoot man on my watch. You'll hide behind my guard house." So I had to hide there until the President passed and he says, "Now you can go, but don't ever come back."

David had two distinct phases to his running career. From his late 30s to his early 50s, he ran and raced with speed and efficiency, competing well in his age group and winning awards. In the New Haven 20K, a 12.4 mile race, he ran, at age 40, a personal best time of 1:22, at 6:40/mile. David ran from the 5k to the 20K but never did a

marathon and explains, "I know the story of Pheidippides who runs the marathon to Athens to say the Persians have landed and then he drops dead. Who wants to do that?" In 1992, David moved to Paris to work for the United Nations as director of a project for world peace and found himself too busy to run for the next decade.

Retiring in 2001 at the age of 62, David returned to the U.S. and once again took up his barefoot running, albeit at a diminished pace. He met up with his running buddies a couple of days a week and was training three to five miles about every other day. It took several years before David returned to the racing scene, but by his late 60s the 5Ks were calling. Between 2008 and 2016 David averaged 10 to 15 competitions a year, totaling close to 100 races, and at age 77, he was still running a brisk 9:45/mile pace.

Until quite recently, David had not had any major medical problems. He has sustained common running injuries like plantar-fasciitis and Achilles tendinitis, but the setbacks have been short. In his 40s David did run into some trouble and says, "Once with the East Rock (running club) gang we ran 10 miles in deep snow, and I ran barefoot and got frost-bitten, so I don't do that anymore. I have one toe that still tells me when it gets cold because that's the toe that got frost-bite."

Then in June of 2016, at the Branford five-miler, I was waiting to photograph David at the finish line, but he never arrived. He had suffered an injury and had pulled himself off the race course. Turns out David had a meniscus tear of the left knee, and he was out of commission for the next four months. But by the end of September he had surgery to repair the knee and was back jogging about a month later. In mid-December David entered his first post-surgery race, the Christopher Martin's Christmas Run for Children, a large and well established 5K event in New Haven, Conn., where he won his 75-to-79 age division in a respectable 10:42/mile.

Keys to David's Success, Health, and Longevity

Running plays a prominent role in David's life and well-being. He points out, "It's become a priority for me, and I don't have a lot of

competing priorities, because I'm retired and divorced. It's a kind of retirement thing, and I have the time to do it. . . . I'm on the computer all the time, and I need to get out, otherwise I'd be a couch potato if I didn't run." And David believes that running has a positive physiological effect on the heart muscle. He says:

Your heart is strong when you run and your heart beats slower. Mine now is in the 50s and that's healthy. Humming birds don't live too long because they use up their heartbeats real fast. Elephants live a long time because they have a slow heart rate. If you have a slower heart rate, you're going to live longer.

David makes reference to diet as being a significant component of health and has this to say:

I read a book a couple of years ago called the Anti-Cancer Book. The author found out that cancer cells need two things in order to reproduce: Glucose and vascularization (abnormal growth of blood vessels). Americans eat much too much glucose in white bread and sugar. As much as possible, I eat natural foods. I went to the farmer's market this morning and got fresh tomatoes, fresh Brussel-sprouts, good brown bread, fresh yogurt—good wholesome food."

David also makes the case for barefoot running as a major contributor to his success and longevity in road racing:

You have to know how to run. Barefoot running helps because you run soft, you don't pound. People always complain they can't hear me catching up on them because I make no noise. . . . Your knees are slightly bent and you roll like this with your feet and you come down on your heel just slightly. There's no heel strike. So you run much softer with shorter strides, and you don't pound your joints.

David ended the interview with a few words from Satchel Paige, the great pitcher in the Negro Leagues: "Don't look back because something might be gaining on you."